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ABSTRACT

This paper contends that the debate over multiculturalism in the university is best understood from a broadened historical perspective. The experiences of educational reformers in Germany and the impact of fascism and communism are explored. Based on a historical approach to the multiculturalism debate, three areas of particular concern are identified: the first is a struggle about access and who belongs to the profession; the second is a conflict about the canon that revolves around what the profession does; and third is a clash about advocacy that involves how the profession relates to politics. In the debate over access to the university, the Central European record suggests broadening opportunities without restricting outcomes. In curricular questions, the German evidence points to widening the scope without mandating new orthodoxies. In politics, the Nazi and Stalinist experiences indicate that commitment needs to be tempered by professional restraint. The paper concludes with thoughts about the kind of profession for which historians might strive. (DB)

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A Liberal Perspective

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CONCERNS FOR THE HISTORICAL PROFESSION:

A Liberal Perspective

Konrad H. Jarausch

The PC debate has degenerated into a shouting match. Impassioned minority advocates cry out against embattled defenders of Western Civilization. The fronts have become curiously reversed: A usually intolerant Right appeals for tolerance while an often tolerant Left seems intolerant. This cultural struggle has grown heated because it involves not just ideas, but careers, research agendas, and institutional control. Such identity politics leave me uneasy, since I find myself represented by neither side. Having emigrated from Europe, I am in a position of privileged marginality that shares elements of both experiences. As a white male who purveys the continental heritage, I represent for many the enemy. But as an immigrant, I have often run up against subtle forms of discrimination myself. No wonder that the fracas leaves me ambivalent.

Perhaps cognitive distance might help sort out this confusion. The current debate operates with a memory that extends at best to 1968. As a historian, I would point out the need for a longer view. The controversy is also remarkably self-absorbed in focusing on the US. As a German-born scholar, I want to emphasize the necessity of a wider perspective that includes fascist and communist examples. Recent discussions are quite impressionistic. As an analyst of the evolution of the university and the professions I am inclined to stress the importance of greater self-reflection. Such a broadened approach to the multiculturalism debate identifies three areas of particular concern: The first struggle about access focuses on who

belongs to the profession. The second conflict about the canon revolves around what the profession does. And the third clash on advocacy touches on how the profession relates to politics.

I.

In Germany, the home of the research university, the reform crusade began over a century ago. During the Second Reich, Liberals, democrats and socialists banded together to demand a broadening of academic institutions. By invoking the neohumanist precept of allgemeine Menschenbildung (general human cultivation) critics demanded wider access, modernization of the canon and freer political expression. They couched their campaign in terms of extending a purportedly universal ideal to groups and areas hitherto excluded.

The pressure for equal opportunities focused on class, race and gender in turn. Socialist criticism fastened upon the limitation of cultivation to an elite. Though universities opened to the lower middle class by 1910, it took the working class until after the Second World War to gain access. Racial issues were initially debated in religious terms. Civil emancipation allowed Jewish students to flock particularly to law and medicine. Complaints about underrepresentation gradually increased the Catholic share. Yet women's pressure led to the admission of female students to higher education only around the turn of the century. Subsequently, the struggle shifted to broadening the composition of the professions.

Clashes over social access extended to the content of the curriculum. Since Latin served as a barrier (except for the Catholic clergy), critics demanded the modernization of the canon. In the 1890s partisans of classical versus modern training engaged in

a veritable school war over admission to higher learning. At the same time, technical and commercial institutions demanded equality with the universities. Within the traditional centers of learning, many new disciplines such as the social sciences fought for academic recognition through professionalization. Following the Rankean impulse, historians transformed their amateur pursuit into a life-long occupation by setting standards, sponsoring journals and creating associations (such as the AHA).

University reform also redefined the relationship between scholarship and politics. Despite a tradition of academic freedom, the government tightly controlled expression. Unable to enforce monarchist views, Berlin accepted liberal commitment as long as it supported national causes such as building a fleet. But when democrats argued against military expenditures and socialists demanded social reform, the authorities drew the line. Not surprisingly, advocates of broader access and a more modern curriculum were often politically progressive. Their multiple reform agenda therefore combined equal opportunities with curricular modernization and a more liberal political stance.

II.

Just when it seemed to have won, the reform campaign stalled. It foundered partly on the illiberal resistance of old interests. But progressive arguments also became a victim of their own success. Aggravated by general Weimar problems, the changes which reformers brought about created a severe backlash that undid many of the advances. After the Nazi defeat, Communist attempts to correct fascist errors created new problems in turn. Although German strug-

gles cannot be equated with American conflicts, these unanticipated consequences offer suggestive parallels to current debates.

The broadening of access produced severe overcrowding during the 1920s. Coupled with hyperinflation and the Great Depression, the glut of graduates created an academic proletariat. The very newcomers from the lower classes, Jews and women that thronged into the professions devalued those credentials that had just been won. The Nazis resolved the academic overcrowding through biopolitical exclusions, based on race, gender and politics, which also restricted social opportunities. To guarantee a progressive outcome, the East German Communists instituted a reverse quota system that denied access to the offspring of the old educated middle class. But this overcorrection proved impossible to maintain in the long run, since the new nomenklatura would not have its children shut out.

Progressive revisions of the canon triggered a similar backlash. Modern secondary schools and technical institutions succeeded in maintaining their new rights. But the reactionary 1930s swept away much Weimar innovation in psychiatry, social medicine, sociology and the like. In part the Nazi triumph was based on the illusion of restoring professional authority. Yet the Third Reich created counterfeit specialties like Racial Science or German Physics. As a corrective, the GDR introduced Marxism-Leninism departments that thrived because their instruction was mandatory. Though they created fewer new disciplines, the East Germans subjected the humanities and social sciences to deadening Stalinist control.

The erosion of the notion of objectivity politicized academe with a vengeance. In the Empire critics like Friedrich Nietzsche

ridiculed claims of disinterested knowledge in order to undermine convention. During the Weimar Republic Max Weber revived the distinction between propaganda and Wissenschaft as a defense of liberal thinking against right-wing attacks. In the Third Reich, the concept once again disappeared in the rhetoric of race, blood and soil. In the GDR the Communists also demanded partisanship, albeit not for the Volk, but for the working class. In both dictatorships a few practitioners used standards of professionalism as retreat from political demands and as refuge for disinterested thought.

III.

What implications does the German cautionary tale have for current American concerns? Obviously such contradictory experiences can be read in a variety of ways. My purpose in invoking them is not to tar anyone with a totalitarian brush, but to point out some dangers of sympathetic views, pushed to an extreme. The laudable effort to open access, rethink canons and advocate involvement will only succeed, if it learns from the failures which have derailed similar initiatives in the past. Neither obdurate resistance nor strident hectoring are much help. Only a reform project that respects some inherent limits will advance in the long run.

In the access debate, the Central European record suggests broadening opportunities without prescribing outcomes. Universal aspirations for human self-determination can only be realized if all people have the same chance. Formally opening institutions does not suffice, if there are informal networks that make competition unequal. Elaborate tutoring, financial aid and social support systems are needed to correct long-standing cultural deprivation.

Without appropriate mentoring and role-models, other steps yield little return. Even student subculture in fraternities and activity groups must be drawn in. But reversed quotas, however well intentioned, may turn out to be counter-productive. The East German example suggests that they violate academic freedom and produce unanticipated consequences. Prescribed outcomes invariably encourage mediocrity because they guarantee success without effort. In the name of overthrowing old privileges, they create new prerogatives. Righting an old wrong with a new wrong does not make a right.

In curricular questions, the German evidence points to widening the scope without mandating new orthodoxies. No doubt, classical European canons are seriously incomplete. They not only leave out different experiences of class, gender and race, but also reinforce a kind of cultural xenophobia that has contributed to countless wars. Minority memories must be retrieved in order to break up historical master narratives with a diversity of points of view. But the German past also cautions against creating notions of privileged speakers, based on social criteria. Scholarship was seriously impoverished when only Aryans could do physics or working-class members were alone allowed to talk about labor history. Clearly, a certain background provides special insights into the past of one's own group. But privileging insiders shields discourses from outsiders' critical control. Turning inclusion into exclusion threatens to balkanize knowledge and mythologizes history.

In politics, the Nazi and Stalinist experiences indicate that commitment needs to be tempered by professional restraint. Philosophical critics have discredited claims to objectivity in historical

writing as a conservative ploy. But does epistemological subjectivism legitimize rampant partisanship? The disastrous involvement by historians in Nazism or Communism should warn against the illusion that all engagement is necessarily progressive. The Foucaultian equation of knowledge with power is a potent solvent of DWEM hegemony. But deconstructing Weberian rationality as white male oppression also erodes the conceptual basis for a progressive political stance. What epistemological procedures or ethical values remain to ground the emancipatory project itself?

The broken lives of German scholars highlight the dangers of unbridled politicization. Twice in this century they put their expertise at the service of a greater cause, only to be abused. This largely self-inflicted disaster suggests the necessity of distinctions between propaganda and scholarship. To my mind, historians need some standard of evidence which will allow them, for instance, to refute the "revisionist" claims that the holocaust never happened. The Third Reich and Communist experiences also suggest that effective scholarship requires the protection of civil rights. Paradoxically, research needs to resist political instrumentalization and to defend the preconditions for rational inquiry at the same time. How can scholars reconcile the conflicting imperatives of disinterested analysis and advocacy of academic freedom? Perhaps the best historians might hope for is a more acute awareness of the tension between objectivity and commitment.

IV.

These reflections on the German example leave a skeptical observer between all fronts. Such a result does not need to be parti-

cularly troubling, because that is the place where liberals belong. Conservative defenders of intellectual elitism, a Western canon and of scholarly objectivity have lost their credibility since they have all too often failed to live up to their professed ideals. More appealing are the advocates of diversity and difference who promote a necessary opening to a variety of experiences and of ways of understanding. But their understandable zeal to tear down old walls sometimes appears to be erecting new barriers in turn.

What kind of profession might historians strive for? The concept of a male elite, guarding the Euro-American heritage in the name of "science" has necessarily fallen into disrepute. This posture fails to admit its exclusivity and is insensitive to the aspirations of minorities for a sense of their own past. It conflates the values of Western culture with a particular set of personal powers and institutional arrangements. More attractive is the open vision of peoples of all classes, races and genders celebrating the diversity of their experiences. But identity politics creates new problems by replacing the male Eurocentric canon with a set of partial group claims. Decrying universalist norms as devious bondage, it only offers the notion of difference as basis for community. I sometimes wonder, if denying intersubjective standards will not dissolve the common ground for institutions of higher learning.

Reforming the profession requires a fresh commitment to reasoned discourse. Clearly organization and political pressure are necessary to produce academic change. But as method of reform I prefer rational debate. The reluctant can only be convinced, if they can voice their reservations instead of having them driven

underground. Imposing diversity by moral coercion rather than persuasion only breeds resentful backlash. The Nazi and Stalinist experiences demonstrate that critical debate is the lifeblood of scholarship. Only rational argument will make skeptics understand that the notion of professionalism must be expanded and redefined, because its application has for too long been limited to white European males. But abandoning professional standards altogether leaves only naked clashes of power. In claiming this enlightenment legacy, broadening access, diversifying the canon and increasing involvement are bound to revitalize the profession of history.